

# WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

## Traditional Environmental Knowledge **Natural Resources and Conflict**

Excerpt from *Contemporary Issues*

Government of Alberta ■





## **NATURAL RESOURCES AND CONFLICT**

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### **NATURAL RESOURCES AND CONFLICT**

Great Bear Lake, in the Northwest Territories, is Canada's second largest lake and one of the deepest in North America. Its blue waters are frozen for all but four months of the year. For thousands of years, the Sahtú Dene people have lived along its shores, following a traditional lifestyle of fishing and hunting caribou.

About 150 years ago, Louis Ayah, a respected spiritual leader, had a vision. Terrible things would happen, he said, when the white man started taking "dangerous rock" out of the ground. The water would become yellow and poisoned, and what looked like a metal bird would take the rock to a faraway land and use it to harm the people living there, who look much like the Dene. Ayah warned his people to stay away from this area.

Ayah's vision came true. In 1930, uranium was discovered at Great Bear Lake. The area was mined for almost thirty years, first under private ownership and then, from 1942–60, under the Crown corporation Eldorado Mining and Refining. Eldorado's primary customer was the United States Army. At 8:15 A.M. on August 6, 1945, a B-29 bomber dropped a bomb containing the "dangerous rock" on Hiroshima, Japan. Up to 200 000 people died as a result. World War II ended soon afterwards.

While it operated, Eldorado hired Dene men for \$3 a day to carry 45-kilogram gunnysacks of radioactive ore from the mine and transport it downriver. The men worked twelve hours a day, six days a week during the four months that Great Bear Lake was ice-free. While working and travelling, the men ate and slept on the huge sacks, and swept the dust from the docks and barges. Sacks were sometimes used later for tents and clothing. Dene Elders remember the men coming home covered from head to toe in dust, the same dust that settled onto the lake, causing the ice and snow to melt faster.

Before the uranium supply ran out, more than 1.7 million tonnes of radioactive waste from Eldorado's operations were dumped into and around Great Bear Lake.

In 1953, the first Port Radium miner died of cancer. The first Dene ore carrier died of cancer in 1960. Since then, cancer has killed at least 50 people in Déline, a Dene community of 650. After learning about scientific evidence linking health problems and uranium, as well as evidence that the Canadian government knew of these dangers as early as 1932, the Dene began in the 1970s to seek restitution. For decades, while caribou herds migrated across radioactive wastelands, the Canadian government denied any problems.

In 1998, widows of the Déline mine workers were horrified to learn of the connection between their lands and the atomic bombs detonated during World War II. One wrote an apology to the people of Hiroshima, and six community members travelled to Japan to express their sorrow.

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Finally, in 1999, the Déline Dene and the government of Canada initiated a joint investigative program, the Canada-Déline Uranium Table. These talks will look for ways to deal with community concerns over the old mine site.

## **INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND THE DEMAND FOR RESOURCES**

Almost everything produced today depends on natural resources. Petroleum products supply plastic, wax, cosmetics, food preservatives, inks, detergents, film, bandages, fertilizer, synthetic fabrics, carpets, certain medicines, non-leather shoes, tires, and CDs. Homes and other buildings are heated by wood, coal, oil, or natural gas. Electricity often comes from burning fossil fuels, such as coal, or from hydroelectric generation.

Demands for new consumer goods and technological advances, along with rising expectations and increased populations, place a huge strain on the natural world. In the search for more resources and new supplies, industries look in even the most inaccessible areas, often the homelands of indigenous peoples.

This global search creates opportunities for developing countries to bring in income and pay off debt. However, decisions to exploit natural resources, typically with the involvement of foreign companies and international financing, frequently displace indigenous peoples from ancestral lands.

Recognizing this, the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development acknowledged that, although countries have the right to exploit their natural resources, this right does not override the rights of indigenous peoples: "Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature."

### **Tourism**

Tourism is sometimes an excellent way for indigenous peoples to use their natural resources sustainably. For example, the Calgary Zoo has established a partnership with Wechiau communities in Ghana to preserve and promote a hippopotamus sanctuary in the northern part of the country. The zoo helps fund the park and promotes it to tourists. The project gives local people a way to make a living from the animals, and helps preserve endangered species at the same time.

With less consultation and care, however, tourism can encroach on the rights of indigenous peoples. For example, tourism in the Cordillera region of the Philippines has resulted in hotels on ancestral lands, and the commercialization of indigenous cultures and traditions. Elsewhere as well, governments and corporations investing in tourism routinely fail to consult with indigenous peoples and to ensure that they benefit from such ventures.

### **Mining**

Mining extracts valuable metals and minerals from the earth, including diamonds and other jewels, the copper essential for electrical wiring, the iron needed to make steel, and the silicon necessary for computer chips. The mining industry provides raw materials for almost everything used in our daily lives. It feeds the industrial world and provides thousands of jobs.

But the process of mining disfigures the Earth and pollutes land and water. Its environmental impact spreads beyond the mine site itself, stretching along access roads, rivers, lakes, airstrips, and power lines. Mining often displaces indigenous people and sometimes destroys their sacred places. When mines close, they often leave a legacy of scars, danger, and contamination.

For example, mining development on Spirit Mountain, once a sacred site to Assiniboine and A'aninin (Gros Ventre) nations living in what is now Montana has left serious surface and ground water pollution. In 1994, the first lawsuit over the poor clean-up resulted in a \$37 million settlement for local communities.

### **Hydroelectricity**

Hydroelectric power supplies 19 percent of the world's electricity. In some countries, it supplies 90 percent. Hydroelectricity is promoted as economical, reliable, and respectful of the environment. Some hydroelectric stations harness the power of waterfalls, but most require dams, which are costly to build and often create large bodies of water close to populated areas.

The larger the dam, the wider the area of flooding, which damages valley and river ecosystems. The World Commission on Dams states that dams have displaced forty to eighty million people, a disproportionate number of them indigenous.

The Itaipu Dam on the Parana River, between Paraguay and Brazil, is now the world's largest hydroelectric complex. Its eighteen turbines produce 12 600 megawatts of electricity, enough to illuminate 120 million 100-watt light bulbs at once. About 1500 indigenous families were forcibly relocated in the 1970s to make room for the dam. Forced to move onto distant reservations — where they suffered economically, socially, and spiritually — these people have never been compensated.

### **Forestry**

Fifty million indigenous people live in rainforests. The world's forests are also home to diverse species of animals, birds, plants, and other organisms, which interact in complex ways. A shared belief among indigenous peoples is that every form of life on the planet has a reason for being. Science increasingly agrees.

Forests are essential to the quality of life for all humans and animals on the planet. They moderate climates, absorb carbon dioxide, produce oxygen, and filter air and water, acting much like global lungs.

From a resource perspective, forests provide lumber, the raw material for building products, paper, and fuel. They also provide other useful plants. Seventy-five percent of prescription drugs in the western world are derived from native plants. Western scientists are still learning about the potential uses of many plants that indigenous healers have used for centuries.

Half of the world's forests have disappeared through logging, agriculture, and urban development. Tropical rainforests are destroyed at a rate of over 130 000 square kilometres per year, and 9 percent of the world's tree species are at risk of extinction. An estimated 137 species of plants and animals disappear from the world every day.

The forestry industry is slowly improving its practices, though clear-cutting and slash-

and-burn techniques remain common. In Malaysia, the world's largest exporter of tropical timber and a country widely criticized for its forestry practices, 2.7 million hectares were logged during the 1990s. A recently established certification process was supposed to improve forestry practices, but the basic rights of indigenous peoples are still often ignored.

### **Petroleum**

Oil is the world's largest source of energy, supplying nearly half of the total energy demand. In 1995, the world used more than three billion tones of oil in a single year — about the weight of three billion small cars. Every day, Canada alone consumes nearly two million barrels of oil. One barrel is enough to fill the gas tanks of four cars; two million barrels could fill a football stadium. The petroleum industry includes some of the world's most profitable corporations, a few of which have larger economies than three-quarters of the world's countries.

Though this industry includes some of the worst offenders against indigenous peoples and the environment, public pressure has led to more progressive policies. For example, Syncrude Canada, our country's largest single oil producer, has established an environmental policy that respects the needs of surrounding communities.

As part of this policy, the company is committed to improving environmental performance. In partnership with the Fort McKay First Nation, Syncrude developed land reclaimed from mining operations into habitats for more than 300 wood bison. Syncrude is also Canada's largest industrial employer of Aboriginal people — more than 700 work for the company, many at highly skilled, high-paying jobs.